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FROM AIT KAOHSIUNG BRANCH OFFICE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/09/2014

TAGS: [PGOV TW](#)

SUBJECT: 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE "KAOHSIUNG INCIDENT" AND  
THE LY ELECTION

REF: 99 TAIPEI 3700 (AIT/K)

Classified By: ROBERT W. FORDEN, AIT KAOHSIUNG PRINCIPAL OFFICER.  
REASON: 1.5(d).

Summary

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1. (SBU) December 10, on the eve of Taiwan's legislative elections, marks the 25th anniversary of one of the most important political events in Taiwan's democratic history. On December 10, 1979, a group of demonstrators supporting the "Dang Wai" (non-KMT) magazine "Meilidao" (Formosa) marched to a downtown Kaohsiung park to commemorate International Human Rights Day. The marchers encountered a phalanx of police and hundreds of local hoodlums recruited to act as agents provocateurs. In the melee that ensued a number of demonstrators and police were injured. The incident led to a crackdown in which many who would become leaders of the dang wai's successor, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), were arrested and incarcerated for lengthy periods. Taiwan Vice President Lu and former DPP Chairmen Shih Ming-teh and Hsu Hsin-liang (both now independent LY candidates) were among those incarcerated. President Chen and the two DPP leaders most rumored to be his likeliest successor, Presidential Office Secretary General Su Tseng-chang and Kaohsiung Mayor Frank Hsieh, all served as defense lawyers for the Meilidao defendants. People First Party (PFP) Chairman James Soong headed the Government Information Office during the incident and was accused by critics of playing a key role in the suppression. In the eyes of many, the Kaohsiung Incident was the turning point in Taiwan's eventual democratic transformation. At a minimum, it was directly responsible for launching the political careers of some of Taiwan's most influential leaders.

2. (SBU) It remains unclear to what extent the 25th anniversary of the Kaohsiung Incident (alternatively known as the "Formosa Incident" or the "Meilidao Incident") will be publicly marked in Taiwan and how it will be exploited by the Pan-Green parties in their political campaigns. Pan-Green political rallies are expected to be held on December 10 and will undoubtedly include mention of the anniversary. However, the Pan Green parties have to date remained silent on whether the anniversary will be a central theme in their election-eve rallies. They may be waiting to assess election prospects and whether the raising of the profile of the anniversary would benefit or harm their candidates' campaigns. End Summary.

The Kaohsiung Incident -- Historical Background

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(The following background is repeated from refTel, issued by AIT/K on the 20th anniversary of the Kaohsiung Incident. Current positions indicated for participants are as of 2004.)

3. (SBU) Formosa Magazine's first issue appeared on August 29, 1979, and sold more than 110,000 copies. Circulation quickly increased and by the third issue had reached nearly four hundred thousand copies. The magazine's Kaohsiung office opened on September 28. The magazine's exploding circulation and its focus on democracy and Taiwanese identity unnerved a KMT leadership already shaken by the United States' December 1978 decision to switch diplomatic relations from the ROC to the PRC. Against this background, the decision by the magazine's staff to organize a march and rally to coincide with International Human Rights Day on December 10 led to the violent confrontation with police and troops from the Taiwan Garrison Command, and to the subsequent crackdown. These events launched the careers of many of today's DPP leaders.

December 9: The Kushan Incident

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4. (SBU) The event which helped spark the violence of December 10 was the arrest and beating of several of the magazine's staff who were publicizing the next day's march and rally. Shortly after dark on December 9, several

volunteers on the staff, including current Vice Minister of Agriculture and former DPP legislator Tai Chen-yao, set off in speaker trucks for Kaohsiung's Kushan District. As the drivers entered a narrow street, they encountered several local police officers who attempted to stop the trucks by lying down across the road. After a brief stand-off the magazine staff bodily removed the police from the road and continued on their route. A short distance on, the road was blocked fore and aft by police vehicles and police officers who broke one truck's windshield and beat the driver.

15. (SBU) In the fight that followed, two of the magazine staff were arrested and taken to Kushan police station. When word of the arrests spread, a crowd of some sixty people including former DPP Chairman Shih Ming-teh (then the magazine's general manager), surrounded the station and demanded the release of the prisoners. The mood of the crowd turned violent when it was learned that the prisoners had been dragged upstairs by the feet and that one had suffered a concussion. According to Tai, police armed with rifles and bayonets surrounded the crowd, which had refused orders to move on. The two were eventually released at about 2:00 am and the crowd dispersed. Though there were no serious confrontations with police at the station, the incident increased tensions and set a confrontational tone for the following day.

#### December 10: The Kaohsiung Riot

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16. (SBU) The December 10 march was to have begun and ended at Kaohsiung Rotary Park, taking a circular route past the Hsin Hseng Police Station. Approximately six hundred marchers set off. Only two hundred meters into the march, the demonstrators encountered a solid wall of riot police while the road on both sides was occupied by approximately 200 "liumang" (hoodlums) allegedly recruited by then Kaohsiung Mayor Wu Yu-yun. According to several AIT/K interlocutors, the two leaders of the gangster elements were Tsai Sung-hsiung (current Deputy Speaker of the Kaohsiung

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City Council) and Chang Hsing-wu, who is also a Kaohsiung City Councilman. (Note: Wu Yu-yun has consistently denied any involvement in recruiting gangsters to disrupt the march. End note.)

17. (SBU) While the ensuing sequence of events is not entirely clear, witnesses and participants agreed that the gangsters acted as agents provocateurs, attacking both police and marchers with bamboo poles and iron rods. In the melee that ensued, the police used tear-gas and riot sticks to break up the march. Reports of injuries range from the hundreds to more than one thousand with one demonstrator later dying of his injuries. Over the next month, more than one hundred and fifty participants and sympathizers were rounded up. Shih Ming-teh and six others were tried in military courts and sentenced to prison terms of between twelve years and life. Several interviewees told AIT/K that only pressure from US congressmen and international human rights groups prevented Shih Ming-teh from being sentenced to death. Thirty-four others were tried in civilian courts and sentenced to terms of four to six years. The arrests effectively silenced the opposition until its leaders were paroled in 1987.

#### Kaohsiung Incident Launches DPP Careers

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18. (SBU) The political significance of the Kaohsiung Incident is that it was the crucible in which the careers of today's ruling party leaders were forged. The list of those arrested and jailed is a who's who of Pan-Green politics. Among them are Vice President Annette Lu (Hsiu-lien); former DPP Chairman, party co-founder and current independent LY candidate Shih Ming-teh; former DPP Chairman Lin Yi-Hsiung; DPP founding father Huang Hsin-chieh; Vice Minister of Agriculture and former LY member Tai Chen-yao; Examination Yuan President Yao Cha-wen; National Security Council Senior Advisor for Cross-Strait Affairs Chen Chung-hsin; and National Policy Advisor Chou Ping-te. Others, including President Chen Shui-bien, Presidential Office Secretary General Su Tseng-chang, DPP Secretary General Chang Chun-hsiung, and Kaohsiung Mayor Frank Hsieh (Chang-Ting), got their political start as attorneys defending the arrested activists. One commentator said that he believes that pressure from the United States on KMT-ruled Taiwan to democratize increased after 1979 and led directly to the end of martial law, the end of the ban on political party formation and the end of restrictions on the press.

19. (SBU) Most in the Pan Green see the Kaohsiung Incident as a turning point in Taiwan's democratization. The ideologically fractured "dang wai" was transformed into a coherent political party capable of forming a viable opposition. The incident and the open trial of the accused

raised political consciousness in Taiwan and brought home the value of democracy. This in turn led the electorate to support the activists, their families and their defense team at the ballot box, enabling many of them to become elected officials at all levels. Taiwanese overseas organized independence movements while scores of Taiwan graduate students abandoned their studies in the US, Europe, and Japan to return home and join the political process. Thus were set in motion the forces which have made Taiwan a vibrant, multiparty democracy, laying the groundwork for the DPP to challenge the KMT and become Taiwan's ruling party.

(END of Background from Reftel.)

James Soong's Role

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10. (SBU) Members of the Pan-Green are not the only current political figures associated with the Kaohsiung Incident. People First Party (PFP) Chairman James Soong, then a member of the KMT, served as the Director-General of the Government Information Office (GIO) from 1979 until 1984. His critics say that as GIO chief he favored heavy-handed censorship of opposition publications, aggressively using libel laws and prison sentences to silence critics. Then and now, many suggest that he might have played a major role in the Kaohsiung Incident. In its aftermath, he defended the suppression and condemned the protesters, calling Shih Ming-teh the "King of Bandits."

Comment -- Will the Pan-Green Use the Anniversary?

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11. (C) Earlier this fall, when Taiwan's Central Election Commission (CEC) was deciding the date of the LY election, Pan-Blue party officials were vehemently opposed to having the LY election set for the day following the anniversary of the Kaohsiung Incident (in the past, LY elections have been held on the first Saturday of December). There was tremendous concern that the Pan Green parties would exploit the anniversary to smear the Pan-Blue parties as "oppressors of human rights." The CEC, however, ignored their pleas, asserting that it was moving the election date to the second Saturday as part of its plans to shift the regular LY election closer to the actual formation of a new LY at the beginning of February.

12. (C) Since then, we have been waiting to see how the Pan-Green campaigns would use the Kaohsiung Incident anniversary, but the issue has been almost completely absent from the campaign trail. In response to our queries as to whether there would be a political rally or Kaohsiung Incident anniversary event in Kaohsiung or elsewhere on December 10, all our interlocutors asserted that there was no plan "yet". That remained the answer even just a few days before the December 10 anniversary.

13. (C) It may be that the Pan-Green camp is waiting to use the anniversary as an election-eve surprise to cap their campaigns, holding back in order to maximize the impact on the electorate the day before the election in a surprise rally. Or, it may be that the Pan-Green parties have determined that the Kaohsiung Incident anniversary could play both ways. After all, there are many now in the DPP and TSU whose political histories are not with the "dang wai," but were with the then ruling KMT. Former President Lee Teng-hui, the primary sponsor of the Pan-Green Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), was a prominent KMT leader at the time of the Kaohsiung Incident. Other local DPP and TSU figures, no doubt including some currently standing as DPP or TSU LY candidates, may also have been on the "wrong" side of

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the incident. Nevertheless, we do expect the Pan-Green to use the 25th anniversary of the Kaohsiung Incident in its election-eve rallies as a final rallying cry to its core supporters to get out and vote on December 11. On the eve of the anniversary the DPP released a book and VCD commemorating the incident at a commemoration event led by Vice President Lu, and we expect more to follow at rallies on the actual anniversary.

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